Chapter 1
A New Society in the Shell of the Old

It is often held that '[p]olitics is about ends and means – about the values that we pursue and the methods by which we pursue them' (Isaac 2002: 32). One question that – explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly – seems to be at stake in nearly every debate in political theory and philosophy, then, is: how exactly do these means and ends relate to each other? Does the end justify any means? Or is there a limit to the methods that can legitimately be used to realise one's ends? Of all tendencies or schools in political theory, anarchism arguably takes the most radical position on this matter: namely, that the means of political action should be consistent with the pursued ends. Many anarchists have insisted that revolutionary movements should seek to embody or reflect their ideal image of a future society within their own practices and organisational structures. The difference between means and ends thus becomes negligible. As the anarchist feminist Emma Goldman wrote in 1924, reflecting on her recent experiences in the newly founded Soviet Union:

> There is no greater fallacy than the belief that aims and purposes are one thing, while methods and tactics are another. . . . All human experience teaches that methods and means cannot be separated from the ultimate aim. The means employed become, through individual habit and social practice, part and parcel of the final purpose; they influence it, modify it, and presently the aims and means become identical. . . . No revolution can ever succeed as a factor of liberation unless the MEANS used to further it be identical in spirit and tendency with the PURPOSES to be achieved. (Goldman 2003: 260–1)

Throughout the history of anarchist theory and practice, various terms and phrases have been used to pinpoint this particular view

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of political practice. Today, the term 'prefiguration' is often used in reference to this idea 'that the means be in accordance with the ends' (Franks 2003: 16). But traditionally, it has also been described as an attempt to 'build a new society in the shell of the old' (Graeber 2013: 232–3). In this chapter, I sketch a brief history of prefiguration as an idea of political practice, which outdates its use as a term, and retrace it to the commencement of anarchism as a distinctive political tradition. Anarchists have employed this idea of 'prefiguration' in two different, but related, ways. As a strategic principle, it originated from the conflict between Karl Marx and his anarchist rival in the International Workingmen's Association, Mikhail Bakunin. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was taken up and further developed by revolutionary syndicalist movements. However, in the course of the past century and a half the anarchist idea of prefiguration also acquired a more ethical or micro-political connotation. Peter Kropotkin, that other great Russian anarchist, promoted the idea that one should not only strive to establish radical change at a structural or organisational level within one's revolutionary movement, but also within one's own living environment and interpersonal relationships. This insight has greatly influenced anarchist and New Left movements in the second half of the twentieth century.

Having reconstructed anarchism's strategic and ethical articulations of prefiguration, I argue that both are underpinned by the ideal-image of a post-political society in which (the possibility of) conflict has no legitimate place. The establishment of this 'new society' is perceived as the 'end' of a revolutionary politics. The question, however, is whether such a depoliticised ideal-image of 'society' is either possible or desirable. Engaging with the democratic thought of Claude Lefort, I argue that prefiguration should be conceptualised not as a gradual process of 'building a new society in the shell of the old', but rather as an experimental attempt to change its political form. Such a radical-democratic conception of prefigurative politics better corresponds with the experiences of contemporary occupy movements.

Bakunin and the Origins of Prefiguration

Much ink has been spilled on the question of where and how the origin of anarchism must be located. 'Anarchism', broadly construed, may be regarded as a synonym for 'anti-authoritarianism' – in which case it arguably has existed throughout the history of mankind

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(Marshall 1993). One may also refer to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon as the first social theorist to explicitly identify himself as an 'anarchist' – which, until then, was used as a pejorative term – in 1840 (Proudhon 1994: 205). However, as a distinctive political movement or tradition anarchism arguably commenced at the moment when a split emerged within the International Workingmen's Association (or the 'First International') between Karl Marx and his followers on the one hand, and his great anti-authoritarian counterpart Mikhail Bakunin, on the other. Although 'prefiguration' was not used as a political term at the time, the historical break between Marxists and anarchists has everything to do with this particular view of revolutionary practice (Maeckelbergh 2009: 59).

In order to appreciate the origin of the conflict between Marx and Bakunin, we may need to briefly turn to the latter's intellectual background. Born to a noble Russian family in 1814, the young Bakunin went to Berlin in 1840 to study Hegelian philosophy. In 1842, Bakunin published a polemical essay, titled 'The Reaction in Germany', in which he developed an alternative reading of Hegel's dialectics (Bakunin 1974c). The latter is often believed to have a typically 'triadic' logic as the dialectical tension between 'thesis' and 'anti-thesis' is understood to resolve in a moment of *Aufhebung*. The two sides are then 'sublated' (that is, simultaneously negated and transcended) into a new, qualitatively different stage. Bakunin developed a different, typically 'dyadic' or 'ant-thetic' dialectics (Leier 2006: 101; McLaughlin 2002: 50). In his view, there could be no reconciliation between the two dialectical sides.

The Young Hegelian Bakunin asserted that truth 'is present only as Positive and Negative, and these mutually exclude each other to such an extent that this mutual exclusion constitutes their whole nature' (Bakunin 1974c: 46). The Negative, which constitutes the revolutionary or progressive side of each opposition, seeks to change or disrupt the status quo. It is both creative and restless. The Positive, on the other hand, seeks to maintain the status quo and thus is characterised by passiveness and unproductiveness. This means that the Positive effectively 'excludes the Negative from itself, [and thus] it excludes itself from itself and drives itself to destruction' (Bakunin 1974c: 49). The relation between the Positive and the Negative thus is essentially a negative one: it can only be resolved in the destruction of the Positive and its reabsorption in the Negative. Dialectical contradiction should eventually lead to the full negation of one of its sides – that is, the passive Positive (Angaut 2007: 77).

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Abstract as this dialectical thought may seem, it has significant political implications. For if the contradiction between two dialectically opposed sides cannot be resolved without the annihilation of one of its two sides, then the Negative must already contain or bring about the new that it will set in its place. Any struggle against the status quo, in other words, also immediately implies the actualisation of its alternative. Of course, this is a *bestimmte Negation*: its content is determined by the nature of the Positive that it seeks to negate. But it nevertheless is the Negative that proactively brings forth a new order that – in and through struggle – will eventually replace the old one. Hence the often-quoted, and generally misinterpreted, concluding words in Bakunin's early essay: 'The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too' (Bakunin 1974c: 58). Evidently, Bakunin did nor argue that destruction in and of itself is a creative act, but rather that it always and necessarily coincides with the creation of something new.

It seems that Bakunin's later, more explicitly anarchist, political thought was still underpinned by this 'anti-thetic' ontology (Angaut 2007: 107; McLaughlin 2002: 51). This becomes most clearly visible in one of his later texts, where Bakunin explains how he arrived at his anarcho-collectivist worldview:

> Even the most rational and profound science cannot divine the form social life will take in the future. It can determine only the *negative* conditions, which follow negatively from a critique of existing society. Thus, by means of such a critique, social and economic science rejected hereditary individual property and, consequently, took the abstract and, so to speak, *negative* position of collective property as a necessary condition for the future social order. In the same way, it rejected the very idea of the state or of statism, meaning the government of society from above downward . . . Therefore, it took the opposite, or negative, position: anarchy, meaning the free and independent organization of all the units and parts of the community and their voluntary federation from below upward. (Bakunin 1990: 198)

Thus, collectivism and anarchism, the guiding principles in Bakunin's later political thought, are not the products of utopian speculation (Nettlau 1996: 105). The hypothetical conditions of the future society are articulated negatively. They emerge out of an analysis of the status quo, which is characterised by capitalist exploitation and state repression. This means that the very forms of repression and exploitation with which revolutionaries (that is: the Negative) are

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confronted most directly, in many respects prescribe the content of its radical alternative. As Murray Bookchin would later put it, '[w]e find forms of affirmation that follow from acts of negation. With the inversion of a "social question" there is also an inversion of the social dialectic; a "yea" emerges automatically and simultaneously with a "nay"' (Bookchin 2003: 7). Or, in the words of the autonomist Marxist John Holloway, '[w]e negate, but out of our negation grows a creation, an other-doing' (2010b: 3).

It was this fundamental insight on radical social change that would eventually fuel the conflict between Bakunin and Marx and their supporters. Ultimately, Marx and Bakunin had a shared political end: a stateless society, devoid of any class distinctions or division of labour. They nevertheless had a radically different philosophical and strategic understanding of how this goal should be pursued. This theoretical difference manifested itself in two ways. First, Bakunin's view of radical politics was significantly more immediatist or decisionist (Schmitt 1985: 66). The only legitimate goal for a revolutionary movement, he held, was the 'immediate, direct, *definitive, and complete* economic emancipation of the workers' (Bakunin 1971a: 170). His ideal image of the revolutionary subject was not the historical class that will rise when the time is ripe, but the eternal rebel or outcast who *chooses* to resist their current conditions. It was the bandit or brigand, who rebels against patriarchal power relations in the Russian *mir* (Bakunin 1990: 211); the 'rabble' or 'riffraff' whom Marx pejoratively called the *Lumpenproletariat* – but which, according to Bakunin, is 'almost unpolluted by bourgeois civilization' (Bakunin 1971c: 294); Adam and Eve, the first to defy the laws of their creator, or even Satan himself – 'that eternal rebel, the first freethinker and the emancipator of worlds' (Bakunin 1974a: 112). For the anarchist Bakunin, resistance was not inspired by a complex theory, a comprehensive agenda or a historical predisposition (Bakunin 1974b: 198), but rather by the desire to see immediate change 'through practical action' (Bakunin 1971a: 167).

This difference also had important implications at a strategic level. Marx (2010b: 355) argued that state power should be appropriated and employed as a political instrument until the class distinctions between proletariat and bourgeoisie had gradually disappeared. The immediatist Bakunin, instead, insisted that the state had to be dismantled 'on the first day of the revolution' (1992: 130). He also advocated the immediate abolition of hereditary law

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(Leier 2006: 237–8) – this much to the annoyance of Marx, who stressed that revolutionary struggle should be directed against the very structural basis of capitalism and private property, and not its superficial mechanisms such as the state or hereditary law (Marx 2010c; see also Eckhardt 2016: 19–23). But Bakunin insisted that political struggle must itself contain the very seeds of the radical alternative that it seeks to bring about. How could Marx, who advocated the establishment of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat', expect this newly founded 'people's state' to gradually wither away, rather than to constitute yet another class society? Liberty, Bakunin claimed (1990: 179), 'can be created only by liberty, by an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organization of the workers from below upward'. And this meant that any radical workers' organisation, such as the International, should aspire to realise its alternative to the status quo on its own terms – rather than to pursue state power. A certain measure of consistency was required between the means employed in revolutionary struggle and the ends that were negatively articulated in this struggle.

This resulted in the so-called 'embryo hypothesis' – the idea that the International, as a workers' organisation, should seek to embody its ideal of a future society within its own practices and organisational structure (Nettlau 1996: 196; Schmidt and Van der Walt 2009: 21). The International, Bakunin argued, should consist of various international sectors, uniting revolutionary workers within the same trade. These trade sectors would be so organised that they could be the 'living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old world' (1971b: 255). One of the best expressions of this view can be found in the *Sonvillier Circular*, a pamphlet published in 1871 by the Jura Federation within the International, which was spearheaded by Bakunin:

> The society of the future should be nothing other than the universalization of the organization with which the International will have endowed itself. We must, therefore, have a care to ensure that that organization comes as close as we may to our ideal. How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization? Impossible. The International, as the embryo of the human society of the future, is required in the here and now to faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation and shun any principle leaning towards authority and dictatorship. (Jura Federation 2005: 97–8; see also Eckhardt 2016: 107–9)

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In 1872 the General Council of the International, which was in Marx's hands, expelled Bakunin and his Jura Federation from the International. This marks the beginning of anarchism as a distinctive revolutionary tradition. But in the idea that 'the International was to provide the organisational basis for a postrevolutionary society and, therefore, that the means adopted by the workers must be consistent with their end' (Graham 2015: 176), we also find the origin of a particular view of radical change that is now referred to as 'prefiguration'. As I will argue in the next section, this idea of a prefigurative revolutionary strategy was taken up and further developed by the syndicalist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Syndicalism and the 'Embryo Thesis'

Bakunin and his Jura Federation were not the only ones to argue that a revolutionary movement should try to resemble a future society in embryonic form. In his address to the 1868 congress of the First International in Brussels, the Belgian socialist delegate César De Paepe argued that workers' associations and trade unions would have to fulfil a double revolutionary role. Their task was not merely to organise strike actions in order to enforce better working conditions in the long term. In the meantime, they should also prepare to take control of the means of production and organise an international workers' movement (quoted in Graham 2015: 92). In the event of a revolution, this movement should have the institutional means available to replace the capitalist state with an international, federated system of workers' self-management. De Paepe (2018) argued that the International should itself bear 'the seeds of all the institutions of the future. Let a section of the International be established in each commune; the new society will be formed and the old will collapse with a sigh.'

This idea was formative to the syndicalist tradition that emerged in the late nineteenth century.[1] Syndicalists held that a new society and its institutional form should not be created after the revolution, but should instead be constituted within and against the current capitalist order. This in many respects echoes Bakunin's view of revolutionary change (Damier 2009: 5–6; Schmidt and Van der Walt 2009: 153), but syndicalists insisted that a central role was to be played specifically by trade unions. As the syndicalist theorist Rudolf Rocker (2004: 57) argued, the union should serve both as 'the fighting organization of

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the workers against the employers' and as 'the school for the intellectual training of the workers' that would prepare them to '[take] the socio-economic organism into their own hands and [remake] it according to Socialist principles', after the revolution.

In France, this idea of the prefigurative revolutionary union was defended most avidly by the shop assistant and syndicalist activist Émile Pouget, who argued that 'the task of the trade unions is to lay the groundwork for the future' (2005: 435). Together with Émile Pataud, Pouget co-authored a utopian novel titled *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution*, in which the authors laid out a strategic plan for how the syndicalist movement could effectively acquire control over the means of production and replace the bourgeois state with a revolutionary, union-based apparatus (Pataud and Pouget 1990; see also Damier 2009: 25). Pouget also played a prominent role in the syndicalist Confédération Générale du Travail, still one of the largest trade unions in France, which states in its 1906 Charter that 'the union, today a resistance group will be, in the future, a group for production and redistribution, the basis of social reorganization' (CGT 2012).

A similar strategy was implemented by syndicalist unions during the Spanish civil war of 1936–9. The Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) not only had to wage battle against General Franco's fascists – but it also, at the same time, tried to radically reform economic relations within their own territories. Although the union's leadership was reluctant to implement a prefigurative strategy while a civil war was raging through the country, the CNT's rank and file continued to collectivise land, farms, factories and public services. In thousands of businesses, from small enterprises to the railways and telephone services, the CNT militants implemented new forms of workers' self-management and collective ownership (Mintz 2013).

The most famous and profound syndicalist expression of a prefigurative strategy, however, was given by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Founded in 1905, 'the Wobblies' had 150,000 members at its peak in 1917. Although the lion's share of its members was based in North America, this internationalist union used to have branches in every corner of the world (Cole et al. 2017). In the preamble to its constitution, the IWW pinpointed its own revolutionary strategy as follows:

> It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for everyday

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> struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old. (IWW 2021)

This last phrase is often perceived as the most profound expression of the idea of prefiguration (Schmidt and Van der Walt 2009: 21). A new society, based on principles of equality and freedom, gradually grows within the belly of the beast – the old society, defined by exploitation and repression. Like an embryo, slowly developing all the features that it needs to survive outside of the womb, this new society waits for the right moment to be born. In its forms of organisation and collaboration, it gradually shapes a new order that will soon break through the old one and establish itself in its place.

This image has continued to speak to the imagination of radical theorists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. In the 1970s, the Quaker and anti-war activist George Lakey set out a comprehensive strategy along similar lines. He proposed to gradually set up a vast network of radical democratic councils. These 'Groups for Living Revolution', as Lakey called them, should not only seek to engage with various social struggles, but could also serve to politicise public institutions such as cooperative stores and local schools, thus turning them into counter-institutions that may eventually replace the contested order. 'As these institutions grow,' Lakey argued (1987: 48), they would 'become part of the unfolding new society. The people transfer allegiance from the discredited institutions of the past to these new institutions.' Lakey's revolutionary strategy and his views on consensus-based decision-making have significantly influenced the repertoire of American social movements until today (Cornell 2011; Graeber 2009: 235; 2013: 194–5). The IWW and its distinctive prefigurative strategy was also an important source of inspiration for Italian autonomist Marxist movements of the 1960s (Tarì 2011: 104–5; Wright 2002: 190–6). It continues to resonate in the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, who use similar terms to describe how the emergence of new forms of biopolitical production and networked communication give rise to non-capitalist relations of property, and to new platforms of political organisation within and against empire (Hardt and Negri 2000: 207; 2009: 8). Within the current capitalist order, they claim, 'we can already recognize . . . the makings of a new society in the shell of the old' (2009: 301).

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What exactly would a transition of power, from the old society to the new one, look like in practice? At what point will the new society burst through the shell of the old, so to speak, and what is needed to enforce such a breakthrough? In order to further this moment of collapse, most syndicalists promoted the tactic of 'direct action', work strikes and sabotage (Trautman 2014). Such actions both served to enforce short-term demands for the improvement of working conditions, and, in the longer term, to mobilise and empower a growing unionised movement 'within the shell' of a capitalist society. A General Strike in every trade and branch of industry would eventually give capitalism its deathblow (Pouget 2010: 175). It appears, however, that syndicalists often had no idea of when this tipping point might happen (Damier 2009: 124). In any case, and apart from a few short-lived successes in revolutionary Spain, such a triumphant moment never occurred in the history of syndicalism. Some contemporary anarcho-syndicalists have thus altogether discarded the idea of one great revolutionary moment. As the British anarcho-syndicalist Solidarity Federation today argues, '[t]he libertarian communist revolution is a process. It is a movement. It will likely develop and blossom from strike waves to expropriations over a period of years. This isn't a "transitional phase", it is what the revolution is' (Solidarity Federation 2012: 110). What remains, however, is a strong commitment to the idea that the current society and its political institutions must gradually be replaced with a radically new and revolutionary structure.

We thus may conclude that, from its inception in the break between Marx and Bakunin in the First International, the anarchist and syndicalist tradition was underpinned by a particular revolutionary strategy. Anarchists insisted that their revolutionary movement should seek to embody, within its own organisational structure and political practices, the kind of society that it wished to establish in the future (Boggs 1977a: 100). It must be stressed that this view was first and foremost informed by practical considerations. The idea was that the means employed in revolutionary struggle inevitably determine the course of action and its possible outcomes. Ensuring consistency between means and ends was preferred because it was deemed strategically advantageous (Graeber 2013: 190–1). In conclusion, this early form of prefiguration was still rather consequentialist: it was in light of the perceived outcome that a political means or course of action should be legitimised (Gordon 2018: 529).

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However, in anarchist theory and practice the meaning of 'building a new society in the shell of the old' has shifted in the course of the twentieth century. Andrew Cornell argues that whereas most pre-Second World War anarchists and syndicalists sought to prefigure the new world within their own organisational structures, a post-war generation of anarchists sought to create the desired social relations within their everyday lives and living environment. Their 'prefigurative lifestyles and communities were less and less embedded in broader working-class traditions and neighborhoods, and they were not paired with confrontational class struggle' (Cornell 2016: 208; see also Boggs 1977a: 119). A strong measure of consistency between means and ends was preferred not merely for its strategic merits, but also because it was considered morally preferable to act in accordance with one's ends and values, or more liberating to pursue radical change within one's own living and working environment. How could this second concept of prefiguration spring from the same anarchist tradition and come to predominate over the more strategic one? In order to answer this question, I will first return to the work of another classical anarchist theorist: Peter Kropotkin.

Mutual Aid and Cooperation: Kropotkin's Affirmationist View of Prefiguration

If Bakunin is often depicted as a passionate propagator of revolutionary violence whose ideas were 'luridly illuminated' by 'the destructive vision of blood and fire' (Woodcock 1963: 171), then the other great Russian champion of anarchism, 'prince' Peter Kropotkin, is often presented as his more moderate counterpart, who 'showed an extraordinary mildness of nature and outlook' (Woodcock 1963: 172; see also Avrich 2005: 27). This benign image obscures the fact that Kropotkin did recognise the legitimacy and inevitability of revolutionary struggle (Kinna 2016a: 13–18). And although they never met in person, Kropotkin was in many ways influenced by Bakunin and his intellectual and political heritage (Kropotkin 1899: 311; See also Marshall 1993: 311). There are, however, significant differences between the two key theorists of the anarchist tradition. If Bakunin provided a first philosophical framework for the anarchist movement and then continued to become its international figurehead, Kropotkin laid the empirical groundwork for a more

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scientific anarchism (Leier 2006: 72–3; Mac Laughlin 2016: 155) and further developed its ethical framework.

Kropotkin's most famous work is *Mutual Aid,* published in 1902, in which he presented a counter-narrative to social Darwinism. This current, which was fashionable at the time, reduced every aspect of both human and natural life to a function of the evolutionary 'struggle for survival'. It claimed that 'the struggle for the means of existence, of every animal against all its congeners, and of every man against all other men, was "a law of Nature"' (Kropotkin 2006: xiii). Kropotkin, however, contended that war and competition are by no means the 'normal state of existence' (Kropotkin 2006: 94). Mutual aid or solidarity between members of the same species is no less significant as an evolutionary principle. As a matter of fact, mutual aid has been a much more important factor of evolution than competition – not least because a large part of animal species are social beings that tend to live in groups (Kropotkin 2006: 25). This applies to many species of mammals, birds and insects – but also, Kropotkin insists, to *Homo sapiens*. Our ability to live together peacefully, and to establish a durable social, economic and political order, is not merely the product of civilisation. It is ingrained in our human nature and social instinct, and it has played an important role in the establishment of human society at various stages of its evolution. Kropotkin showed how communities of 'savages', 'barbarians', the medieval city and modern trade unions or cooperatives were all based on the same principle of mutual aid (Morris 2018: 155–6). Why, then, do we still find ourselves in a world characterised by exploitation and oppression? Kropotkin argued that, throughout the history of mankind, various mechanisms have corrupted this potential for peaceful cooperation and mutual aid. The centralised and authoritarian state has 'systematically weeded out all institutions in which the mutual-aid tendency had formerly found its expression' (Kropotkin 2006: 186). In spite of its best efforts, however, the state has not managed to root out solidarity in all its forms. Mutual aid has always 'reappeared and reasserted itself in an infinity of associations which now tend to embrace all aspects of life' (Kropotkin 2006: 243).

Kropotkin in fact believed that, in his own time, mutual aid and cooperation had become more widespread than before, and that a durable society founded on such principles was already within reach. 'We can already catch glimpses of a world in which the bonds which bind the individual are no longer laws, but social habits,'

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he stated optimistically (Kropotkin 2015: 35). As he established in two other major works, various technological and economic developments indicated that the 'existing societies . . . *are inevitably impelled in the direction of communism* (Kropotkin 2015: 31). In *The Conquest of Bread*, published in 1892, Kropotkin sketched the image of a future anarchist-communist society in which both the means of production and its products are held in collective ownership. Capitalist divisions of labour are done away with, and society as a whole secures each individual's right to well-being (Kropotkin 2015: 18). In his 1898 collection, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, he moreover showed how recent agricultural innovations allowed his contemporaries to grow sufficient food on relatively small patches of soil, even within urban environments (Kropotkin 1985: 106). Before long, he speculated, a few hours' work a day should suffice to provide ample means for everyone, so that the remaining leisure time could be devoted to study, arts and handicrafts (Kropotkin 1985: 187). These ongoing developments suggested that mankind would soon be able to abolish capitalist exploitation and statist control, if 'the voluntary associations which already now begin to cover all the fields of human activity would take a still greater extension so as to substitute themselves for the State in all its functions' (Kropotkin 1970a: 284).

This aspect of Kropotkin's radical thought has been of significant influence in twentieth-century anarchist theory – especially in the work of so-called 'practical anarchists'. Colin Ward, for instance, opens his famous book *Anarchy in Action* with the following, ironic question: 'How would you feel if you discovered that the society in which you would really like to live was already here, apart from a few little, local difficulties like exploitation, war, dictatorship and starvation?' (Ward 2008: 23). David Graeber seems to take a similar view when he asserts that in many ways – and in most aspects of our normal, everyday lives – we *already are* anarchists and communists. All social systems, including capitalism, 'have always been built on top of a bedrock of actually existing communism' (2011: 95; see also Scott 2012: xii). Manifestations of such a 'baseline communism', as Graeber calls it, can be encountered in the most everyday moments and circumstances. It arguably can also be found in nearly every social, cultural or historical context. This why many anarchist theorists, and particularly those inspired by Kropotkin, eagerly search for traces of less hierarchical and more egalitarian forms of organisation in prehistoric or indigenous societies

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(Gelderloos 2016; Scott 2017). But another example would be the forms of mutual aid and solidarity that emerge in the aftermaths of both natural and human-inflicted disasters. Rather than rush to the assistance of their citizens, governmental institutions often tend to withdraw from such situations and to abandon the needy. When they are left to themselves, however, citizens often succeed in setting up their own infrastructures for mutual aid and crisis management (Solnit 2009). Scott Crow describes how, after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, anarchist and anti-racist activists set up a collective for mutual aid in one of its poorest neighbourhoods. The absence of the state and its institutions did not limit this emergence of mutual aid – in fact, it was its very precondition (Crow 2011). Seen from Kropotkin's point of view, these examples prove that a society without the state and authoritarianism is not only possible: in fact, new social forms immediately emerge as the state ceases to exist (Marshall 1993: 325).

Kropotkin's substantive ideal of a radically egalitarian and free society was in many ways comparable to that of Bakunin. Yet, he arrived at this conclusion via a rather different theoretical route. According to Bakunin, as we have seen, it is in opposition to current social and political relations that its radical alternative can be imagined. His ideal of a stateless, federated political order and a collectivist economy should gradually take shape within and against the status quo. Kropotkin, on the other hand, found the seeds for a future society not primarily in struggle, but in already-existing social practices and relations throughout the (natural) history of mankind. His aim was not merely to build a 'new society in the shell of the old', but rather to liberate these already-existing forms of mutual aid and self-organisation, and to finally break the shell that restrains them (Kropotkin 1992: 81). In that respect, his view of social change was distinctively affirmationist. The objective of social struggle, to put it in Ward's terms, would thus be to 'so enlarge the scope and influence of [existing] libertarian methods that they become the normal way in which human beings organise their society' (Ward 2008: 163). However, Kropotkin disagreed at a more substantive level with the syndicalists. He was not convinced that the trade union could, in and of itself, be the 'embryo' of a new society (Nettlau 1996: 277–8; Schmitt and Van der Walt 2009: 134). Union politics had a tendency to become bureaucratic and it often 'lacked anarchism's breadth of vision' (Kinna 2016a: 172). If anything, it was the social commune

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that could serve as the constitutive basis of a future social order (Kropotkin 1992; Morris 2018: 275).

In Kropotkin's anarchist thought we can thus see the emergence of a second conception of prefiguration *avant la lettre*. It is centred on the same idea that in order to establish radical social change, a high degree of consistency must be observed between the means and ends of revolutionary practice. '[A] conception of human progress and of what we think desirable in the future,' he argued, 'leads us inevitably to our own special tactics in the struggle' (1970c: 184). However, this view of prefiguration also pertains to overcoming long-established habits and social conventions, and cultivating virtues such as solidarity and cooperation, courage and devotion (1970b: 108). As Ruth Kinna (2016a: 165) argues, Kropotkin's moral framework is ultimately based on an assertion of the famous Golden Rule: 'Treat others as you would like them to treat you under similar circumstances.' One should adhere to elementary principles such as freedom and equality with the highest possible standard of consistency:

> We do not wish to be ruled. And by this very fact, do we not declare that we ourselves wish to rule nobody? We do not wish to be deceived, we wish always to be told nothing but the truth. And by this very fact, do we not declare that we ourselves do not wish to deceive anybody, that we promise to always tell the truth, nothing but the truth, the whole truth? We do not wish to have the fruits of our labor stolen from us. And by that very fact, do we not declare that we respect the fruits of others' labor? (Kropotkin 1970b: 98–9)

This does not mean that being virtuous or morally consistent, in and of itself, will be sufficient. Kropotkin was still a social revolutionary. But it does follow that consistency between means and ends is not only – or not even primarily – of strategic relevance. We can thus see how, already in Kropotkin's anarchist thought, the focus started to shift towards a more ethical conception of prefiguration. In the next section, we will see how this development was completed in the second half of the twentieth century. In the discourse of many post-war anarchist movements, 'prefiguration' was regarded first and foremost as an ethical or micro-political principle, which may at times be in tension with its more strategic use. In fact, some anarchists would start to read prefiguration as an explicitly *anti*-strategic principle.

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Prefiguration, Ethics and Micro-politics in Contemporary Anarchism

Several developments seem to have contributed to this shift towards a more ethical or micro-political form of prefiguration in the second half of the twentieth century. A first, and arguably most important, factor was the experiences with authoritarian socialism in the course of the previous decades. According to the anarchist moral philosopher Benjamin Franks, many of the atrocities committed by self-proclaimed socialist regimes evinced a typically consequentialist understanding of revolutionary practice in which the end 'justifies the means, even if the methods are autocratic' (Franks 2003: 23). Lev Trotsky (1973: 42), for instance, held that 'the revolution itself is a product of class society and of necessity bears its traits' – and that, as a consequence, the struggle for a just society cannot be of the same nature as this new society itself. He concluded that in revolutionary struggle, 'the means are subordinated to the end' (Trotsky 1973: 55) and that there will inevitably be a tension or discrepancy between them.

Franks argues that anarchists, instead, have always refused to legitimise their conduct with a reference to its perceived outcomes. For them, the means of radical politics must always be 'in accordance with the ends' (Franks 2003: 18). This fundamental insight places 'anarchism outside of instrumentalist political traditions like Leninism and social democracy in which authoritarian methods are justified if they meet libertarian-egalitarian goals' in the long run (2014: 703). The problem with a consequentialist view of revolutionary change, such as the Bolshevists promoted, is that it perceives political action merely as an instrument, whose purpose is entirely external to itself. In consequence, it also reduces individual actors or political movements to mere tools or resourses that political parties or leaders could use as they see fit (Franks 2006: 103). A consequentialist outlook on politics moreover implies that any act or organisational practice can only be appreciated in light of its ultimate, revolutionary end. But what, Franks asks (2003: 24), if this distant end is never fully realised? What if the great 'millennial revolution' never occurs? Should radical political practice not also serve to improve our own, everyday lives in the here and now? Franks admits that a prefigurative approach may not always be the most efficient way to establish durable, systemic change. But, he contends, it does 'produce the very forms of social relationship, albeit in miniature,

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that [its practitioners] hope to achieve in the longer term' (Franks 2010: 146). It should thus not surprise us that the experiences with authoritarian socialist regimes in the first half of the twentieth century not only led to a revival of anarchism in the 1960s and 1970s (Hobsbawm 2007b), but also to an increased interest in its distinctive prefigurative view of radical change (Maeckelbergh 2011b).

Another important factor that contributed to this turn to a more ethical or micro-political idea of prefiguration in the twentieth century was the emergence of the 'New Left' in the 1960s and the gradual rise to prominence of feminist, anti-racist, LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex and asexual/ally), environmentalist and animal rights movements in the second half of the twentieth century (Breines 1989: 14; see also Epstein 1991: 268–9; Kauffman 2017: 13–15). Whereas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, anarchism had been primarily oriented towards class politics, its distinctive critique of hierarchy and systemic power thus acquired a broader application. Anarchists grew more conscious of the various ways in which they continued to reproduce racism, sexism and heteronormativity within their own practices and forms of organisation (Milstein 2012). Prefiguration thus became more strongly associated with the prominent feminist idea that 'the personal is political' (Rowbotham 1979: 133). For many anarchists today, a prefigurative view of radical change necessarily implies that one engages in a myriad of struggles at a broader societal as well as a more personal level (Raekstad and Gradin 2020).

At the same time, 'prefiguration' also came to be strongly associated with the lifestyle choices of individual activists and their communities. Think, for instance, of changing one's consumption pattern by following a vegetarian or vegan diet, restricting oneself to using organic and fair trade goods, or buying from local cooperative stores rather than major supermarkets (Wilson 2014: 191). Some anarchists promote a total abstention from the consumption of addictive goods such as drugs, alcohol and tobacco (Kuhn 2010). Others advocate collective living or polyamory as ways to challenge the patriarchal ideal of the nuclear family as the cornerstone of society (Dixon 2014: 85). Even the endorsement of a countercultural aesthetic has been promoted as an important form of prefiguration as it challenges the hegemony of the culture industry and the homogeneous standards of beauty, health or success that it tends to impose on us (Portwood-Stacer 2013). In short, as well as establishing a radically different society, many contemporary anarchists also

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seek 'to liberate *themselves* to the greatest degree possible' (Gordon 2008: 39; see also Crass 2013: 23; Holloway 2010a: 153–4).[2]

This turn towards a more 'lifestylist' or micro-political form of prefiguration has also been subject to critique. Murray Bookchin (1995b) famously warned that the adaptation or facilitation of alternative lifestyles is unlikely to lead to systemic or durable change in the long term. Some activists, however, have precisely endorsed a prefigurative approach because of its perceived anti-strategic character. In her studies of the New Left in the 1960s, Wini Breines draws a distinction between a strategic social movement politics, which is 'committed to building organization in order to achieve major structural changes in the political, economic and social orders' (Breines 1989: 7), and prefiguration, which she defines as an 'essentially anti-organizational politics' (Breines 1989: 6). This does not mean that the advocates of a prefigurative approach within the New Left were not concerned with revolutionary strategy. But, Breines holds, 'they were in fact making a moral as well as an organizational statement' (Breines 1989: 39), which indeed meant that the capacity to consistently embody one's future ideals in the here and now was equally important as establishing structural change in the long term (Epstein 1991: 17).

Finally, another significant shift in the prefigurative politics of anarchist movements is that it has acquired a more spatial – and, by virtue of that, also often a more temporary and local – character. At a fundamental level, anarchism challenges the way in which space is divided by national borders and appropriated by means of capitalist property rights. Anarchists have always sought to 'dissolve any such categorization and classification schemas that promote spatiotemporal permanence' (Springer 2016: 62). But the turn towards a more micro-political form of prefiguration arguably did render anarchist practice a more localist character. Prefigurative experimentation not only requires a physical space in which people can engage in open debate and collective organisation, but also the ability to wrest oneself from established power mechanisms and the social space controlled by them. This means that it often entails the occupation of streets, squares and parks, endangered nature reserves, abandoned houses, factories or public buildings (Dee 2016; Epstein 1991: 83; Hammond 2013). The anarchist author Hakim Bey (2003) famously coined the term 'Temporary Autonomous Zone' (TAZ) in the 1980s, in reference to these kinds of liberated spaces or 'free enclaves', which emerge when people engage with prefigurative politics

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(Day 2005: 35–6). Critics, however, warn that these kinds of occupied spaces are 'understood and built as explicitly temporary – not spaces for sustained change or the working-out of concrete alternatives, let alone ambitious competitors to global capitalism' (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 34). The temporal enactment of a new society may not pose any significant challenges to the current one in the long term.

It could thus be argued that, in these respects, the politics of contemporary anarchists 'is only in small part a continuation of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century anarchist movements' (Gordon 2008: 5). The early anarchists and syndicalists sought to gradually unfold the organisational structures that must eventually replace the capitalist state. As we have seen in this section, however, since the second half of the twentieth century the focus of many anarchists seems to have shifted to a more ethical or micro-political form of prefiguration (Bray 2013: 248). I nevertheless contend that at least one aspect runs like a red thread through the history of this tradition since its inception in the conflict between Bakunin and Marx. And this is precisely the idea that the means of radical politics should be consistent with its ends, and that a 'new society' (be it the organisational structures or the social habits and relations that constitute such a society) can and must be formed 'in the shell of the old'.

Prefiguration and Contemporary Occupy Movements

In the past years, many anarchist and social movement scholars have sought to place recent occupy movements such as OWS and 15-M in this anarchist tradition of prefigurative politics (Bray 2013; Graeber 2013; Hammond 2015; Van de Sande 2015). It is striking, however, that both the strategic conception of prefiguration, and its more ethical or micro-political variant, are interchangeably invoked in this field of literature. Most sources focus on the latter, and interpret the activist tent camp as an attempt to create a 'utopian microcosm' (Smucker 2017: 118) '[I]n classic prefigurative fashion,' L. A. Kauffman argues, these occupation movements 'were organized with the hope that they might serve as models for self-managed societies run through directly democratic means' (Kauffman 2017: 169). In other words, rather than as concrete steps towards the gradual establishment of a 'new society', these square occupations are generally seen as attempts to temporarily enact this new society in the here and now (Butler 2015). It is precisely for this reason that these

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movements' prefigurative tendencies have also been criticised as a-strategic or politically ineffective (Gerbaudo 2017: 179; Mouffe 2013; Smucker 2017; Srnicek and Williams 2015). But at the same time, some sources seem to suggest that these square occupations also served a more strategic purpose. David Graeber, for instance, describes the movement's original strategy as follows:

> The idea would be to occupy a . . . public space to create a New York General Assembly, which could, like its European cousins, act as a model of genuine direct democracy to counterpoise to the corrupt charade presented to us as 'democracy' by the U.S. government. The Wall Street action would be a stepping-stone toward the creation of a whole network of such assemblies. (Graeber 2013: 42–3)

And indeed, this is precisely what many occupation movements set out to do. In the summer of 2013, after Istanbul's occupied Gezi Park had been cleared out, the movement continued to set up different assemblies and councils in all of the city's neighbourhoods, thus creating a vast network of small, local public assemblies (Roos 2013). Under the slogan 'Toma los barrios' ('Take the neighbourhoods'), the Spanish *Indignados* also set up local assemblies in every part of Madrid, which all reported back to a central Asamblea Interbarrios. From these local assemblies, which often closely collaborated with already-existing neighbourhood committees, a multitude of action groups and campaigns sprang forth (Sánchez 2012; see also Flesher Fominaya 2020: 118–22). OWS was arguably less successful in the pursuit of this strategy. But whereas it may not have established a durable network of assemblies, a manifold of new local action groups and networks, such as Occupy Our Homes and Occupy Sandy did emerge in its wake (Gould Wartofsky 2015: 221; Manilov 2013). We may thus conclude that many of these occupy movements sought to gradually and durably unfold a new political structure in the long term – albeit with varying results.

In short, it is not difficult to recognise how various anarchist ideas of prefiguration have directly or indirectly informed the practices of recent occupy movements. At the same time, the originally anarchist notion of prefiguration does not sufficiently grasp their radical potential and democratic relevance. In the next section, I flesh out a number of objections to this originally anarchist view and propose that we reimagine prefiguration as a distinctively radical-democratic form of politics.

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The Political Institution of Society

Why draw a distinction between anarchism and radical democracy in the first place? After all, it may as well be argued that anarchism is part of a more encompassing, radical-democratic tradition. Anarchists have always advocated self-organisation and participatory decision-making both within their own movements and as the founding principles of a future society. On an ontological plane, however, there seems to be a significant difference between contemporary radical-democratic theory on the one hand, and 'classical' anarchism on the other – which has important implications for our understanding of prefigurative democracy and its radical potential today. I specifically take issue with the (essentially depoliticised) concept of 'society' or 'the social' that I claim is implied in the anarchist idea of prefiguration as 'building a new society in the shell of the old' (in its strategic as well as its more ethical or micro-political articulations). It should be stressed that some contemporary (post-) anarchists have become more critical of this original anarchist notion of society. But as I will argue below, even their idea of radical social change appears to be underpinned by a depoliticised idea of social division and conflict – and, in consequence, of society per se.

The anarchist ideal of a future, post-revolutionary society is essentially a depoliticised one in the sense that it is primarily based on voluntary association, mutual aid and collaboration between social groups and its individual members. A prefigurative process should thus culminate in the establishment of a 'new society' that is devoid of social division and political conflict: or, essentially, a post-political society. This was never a fundamental point of disagreement between the Bakuninist and Marxist factions within the First International (Hobsbawm 2007a: 81). Friedrich Engels famously argued that, after the revolution and the subsequent withering away of the state, 'the government of persons [would be] replaced by the administration of things' (Engels 1987: 268).[3] Anarcho-syndicalists had a similar aspiration, as they sought to gradually replace the current society and its political institutions with an essentially administrative system of workers' councils. Both Kropotkin's idea of a social order based on an ethics of mutual aid and cooperation, and the aspiration of contemporary anarchists to live consistently with one's moral values, seem to be underpinned by the – often explicit, sometimes more implicit – ideal image of a harmonious society which holds no legitimate place for political conflict (Critchley 2007: 129).

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Emma Goldman (1969: 67) even described anarchism as 'the theory of social harmony'. Thus, the end of prefiguration, as anarchists have it, arguably is also the end of politics *tout court*.

It is questionable to what extent this ideal image of a society without social or political division is either realisable or even desirable. The democratic thought of Claude Lefort can help to problematise this social ideal. One of its key features is Lefort's insistence that the social is always politically instituted. In order to understand this, we first need to be able to distinguish between what Lefort calls 'politics' (*la politique*) and 'the political' (*le politique*). Our everyday use of the term 'politics' suggests that there exists a particular institutionalised sphere in which political debates, procedures and conflicts have their proper place: the sphere of Parliament, city councils, political parties, workers' councils and so forth. This is what Lefort refers to as 'politics' (*la politique*). This distinctive political realm, then, is understood to exist alongside other spheres such as the 'economic, the juridical, the aesthetic, the scientific or the purely social' (Lefort 1988c: 11). According to Lefort, however, the very distinction between these spheres (and the various features or characteristics ascribed to each of them) already presupposes a particular political investment, 'because the very notion of society already contains within it a reference to its political definition' (Lefort 1988b: 217). One simply cannot speak of 'the social' or 'society' without acknowledging that a specific political form is implied – not only in its very structure, but at a more fundamental level in any notion that society has of itself. This is what Lefort calls society's *mise en forme*: a 'shaping whereby a society institutes itself as *this* society' (Breckman 2013: 150). Lefort stresses that 'no elements, no elementary structures, no entities (classes or segments of classes), no economic or technical determinations, and no dimensions of social space' can possibly exist without implying such a political form (Lefort 1988c: 11). 'The political' (*le politique*), then, is the ontological level at which this formative process takes place.

The political shaping of a social space (its *mise en forme*) requires that 'society' gives meaning to itself. This is what Lefort calls its *mise en sens*: the particular way in which a social space distinguishes between 'the real and the imaginary, the true and the false, the just and the unjust, the permissible and the forbidden, the normal and the pathological' (1988c: 11–12). In order to represent itself to itself, moreover, this social space must also stage itself in a particular way, which is what Lefort refers to as its *mise en scène* (1988b: 219;

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1988c: 12). He stresses that these *mise en forme*, *mise en sens* and *mise en scène* inevitably take shape against a background of social division, and that they will always be subject to antagonism and dispute (Marchart 2007: 98). Any social order thus is already ingrained by particular divisions, conflicts of interest and inequalities that are *constitutive* precisely of what we call 'society', and which 'bear the mark of a formation' or its *mise en forme* (Lefort 2007: 112). 'Politics' is the distinctive institutional space of power on which such conflicts and divisions can be projected. In a truly democratic society, however, this sphere of 'politics' also forms the stage on which such conflicts on the institution of society can be openly performed, and where in this way 'conflicts of "politics" themselves make up "the political"' (Ingram 2006: 36). Precisely for this reason, democracy should be perceived – and, moreover, must perceive itself – as radically open-ended (Lefort 1988a: 39; see also Abensour 2011: 109). As Martin Breaugh (2013: 28) puts it, 'democracy thrives on conflict and on the endless questioning of the law. In fact, it could not exist without the presence of a multiplicity of conflictual discursive sources incapable of exhausting its meaning and its orientations.'

This brings us back to the anarchist ideal of a post-political society. On a descriptive plane, Lefort argues, this is a naive ideal since a society devoid of political conflict and social division would not be able to perceive itself as a society in the first place. To imagine a society without a distinctive political sphere in which conflicts can be staged thus is effectively impossible. More importantly, it is also potentially very dangerous:

> Whoever dreams of an abolition of power secretly cherishes the reference to the One and the reference of the Same: he imagines a society which would accord spontaneously with itself, a multiplicity of activities which would be transparent to one another and which would unfold in a homogeneous time and space, a way of producing, living together, communicating, associating, thinking, feeling, teaching which would express a single way of being. (Lefort 1986: 270)

As far as Lefort is concerned, this qualifies as totalitarianism. Most regimes seek legitimacy in an external source that does not coincide with society itself (such as a divine order, a particular concept of justice, or – in the case of modern democracy – an 'empty place of power'). A totalitarian regime, on the other hand, presents society as an organic totality that is fully transparent to itself. It does not

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need an external source of legitimacy, but claims to fully embody the interests of an entire class or race. The problem is not merely that totalitarianism represses any form of opposition within and against itself, but rather that such a society is unable to conceive of itself as divided in the face of a position external to it. The divisions, inequalities and conflicts of interest that constitute any society have by no means disappeared: they have become invisible – and, thus, unnameable. One may argue that the anarchist ideal of a post-political society would have similar, distinctively totalitarian, features.

It should be granted that some contemporary anarchist and post-anarchist theorists have long abandoned this 'classical anarchist' ideal of a perfectly harmonious, post-political society. Uri Gordon, for instance, argues that contemporary 'anarchist discourse lacks both the expectation of eventual revolutionary closure and the interest in utopian blueprints for a "postrevolutionary" anarchist society' (Gordon 2008: 40). The inevitable diversity or plurality of any society thus always leaves it 'open to change and challenge from within' (Gordon 2008: 46). As individuals will continue to have conflicting preferences, beliefs or interests, an anarchist society must always continue to accommodate agonistic debate (Springer 2016: 146–7). Such a more complex and less harmonious idea of an anarchist society is also presented in twentieth-century anarchist fiction. Ursula Le Guin's science fiction novel *The Dispossessed*, for instance, narrates the story of planet whose social structure is based on anarchist principles. At the same time, this 'ambiguous utopia' it is by no means devoid of conflict, poverty or scarcity (Le Guin 1974).

In the next chapter, I will engage with the attempts of contemporary anarchists and post-anarchists to develop a more open-ended idea of prefiguration. For now, however, it is important to stress that not just any form of conflict or disagreement should necessarily be qualified as *political*. Some contemporary anarchists may acknowledge that a perfectly harmonious society without any form of interpersonal conflict may never be possible. However, to the extent that it pursues a social order that is devoid of political conflicts between social groups – and that, in consequence, is not constituted by any formal political institutions in which such conflicts can be staged – anarchism often does continue to be informed by the ideal of a post-political society. Even many contemporary and less utopian-minded anarchists thus fail to acknowledge the degree to which division or antagonism between social groups are precisely co-constitutive of these groups' shared discourses and identities.

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Although such antagonisms can never be fully institutionalised (Marchart 2018: 89), I assert that they do require democratic institutions in which they can be staged and articulated in a politically meaningful way. As Cornelius Castoriadis argues, 'a society without [a] State is possible, conceivable, and desirable. But a society without explicit institutions is an absurdity into which both Marx and anarchism lapsed' (Castoriadis 1997: 1; see also 1993: 267).

This brings me to a second objection to the anarchist idea of prefiguration, and the social ideal by which it seems to be underpinned. As we have seen above, there are various ways in which a substantive idea of this 'new society' may be acquired. Bakunin employed a negativistic or 'anti-thetic' methodology: by reversing the contested status quo, he arrived at a hypothetical idea of a future society. Kropotkin, on the other hand, used a more affirmationist approach as he derived his ideal image of the post-capitalist society from already-existing forms of solidarity and mutual aid. This ideal society may be distant, and perhaps not realisable in the short or in even the long term. Or, as some contemporary anarchists insist, it may well be within reach on a small scale – in the sense that one may seek to prefigure alternative social habits and relations within one's own life or social movement. Either way, the suggestion is that a prefigurative process should ideally culminate in the realisation of a particular predefined end – and that, in the meantime, one must try to act consistently with it. This implies that one can have a rather circumscribed idea of what this end entails. Again, this is by no means an exclusively anarchist idea – it arguably is implied in most, if not all, revolutionary tendencies that originated in the nineteenth century. But it is particularly problematic in the context of a discussion of prefigurative politics and its radical potential today. Not only is it impossible to provide a, more or less detailed, image of the future society without resorting to speculation. But more importantly, the suggestion is that one is able to imagine a point beyond which this prefigurative politics is no longer necessary – or even no longer possible. Should prefigurative politics be imagined to have a definitive 'end' at all? Or is it rather a radically open-ended politics, whose aims and objections are continuously challenged and rearticulated throughout the process? I will return to this question in the next chapter.

Finally, a third objection to the anarchist idea of prefiguration as 'building a new society in the shell of the old' concerns the conditions in which this 'new society' should come about. The original slogan

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conveys that an alternative social order can and must take shape independently from all existing political institutions and the social relations or public discourses constructed or maintained by them. However, if it is hard to conceive how this was possible in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it may be almost impossible to imagine what this might look like in our own times. Today, 'the shell of the old society' comprises not only the state and its repressive institutions such as the police and prisons, but an extensive network of public services and infrastructures, healthcare and social welfare institutions, public media, schools and universities. And as every part of social reality has been subsumed under a capitalist mode of production in the course of the past centuries, one may indeed conclude that 'capitalism is so well integrated into every aspect of life that there is no getting away from it completely' (Portwood-Stacer 2013: 147). Is it possible at all to consistently prefigure a radically different society in a social environment that is incompatible with, or even hostile to, its foundational principles (Wilson 2014: 175)? And, to stick with the metaphor, is there any 'empty space' left within the 'shell' of the old society that can gradually be filled with 'new' forms of organising, production and cohabitation? One may indeed doubt if capitalism and its relations of power and control can still be imagined as a 'shell' at all, since it arguably has neither 'outside' nor 'inside'. We are all interpellated by the dominant capitalist ideology, which we actively reproduce at our schools and in the media, in our interpersonal relations and in our use of language. As Louis Althusser (2014: 262–3) put it, 'those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology'. In the same fashion, it is questionable if one could prefigure, or even imagine, a 'new society' that is wholly unaffected or 'uncontaminated' by the old one.

Prefigurative Democracy: Towards a Radical-Democratic Perspective

I have presented three points of critique against the anarchist conception of prefiguration. First, the anarchist ideal of a post-political society that holds no institutional place for political conflict or social division may be impossible as well as politically undesirable. Second, the idea that a prefigurative politics has a predefined end implies that one must have a rather detailed image of what the 'new society' must look like (even if the definitive realisation of such a 'new society' is

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not understood to be within reach). And third, it is questionable to what extent prefiguration may still be imagined as a process of 'building a new society in the shell of the old' in a time when capitalism and the state have permeated nearly every aspect of social and everyday life. If we return to the context of recent social movements, we can see certain tensions emerge between this original anarchist notion of prefiguration and contemporary practices. The temporary occupants of Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol, Zuccotti Park or Gezi Park clearly did not share a detailed understanding of what a future society should look like – let alone, of how to get there (Gerbaudo 2017; Juris 2012; Kotsev 2013; Mensahawy 2020: 130). As a matter of fact, this question was continuously and explicitly at stake in their prefigurative experiments themselves. Rather than a 'model' of the future society, the occupied square should be perceived as a laboratory in which a continuous experiment could take place (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 314). The anarchist idea of prefiguration as a process of 'building a new society in the shell of the old' may thus not suffice to understand their radical potential and relevance.

What, then, would an alternative radical-democratic conception of prefiguration look like? Rather than as a process of 'building a new society in the shell of the old', I propose to conceptualise prefiguration as an experimental attempt to change the political form of society. Thus perceived, prefigurative democracy takes place within, and in engagement with, this existing social space. Its aim is not to live a 'pure' and radically consistent life in the here and now or to form an embryonic and sterile 'new society', but instead to contest and alter its political form, meaning and staging. It does not pursue the establishment of a post-political society, but rather seeks to politicise certain aspects or areas of our everyday life and social environment that were not hitherto perceived as legitimately political. Its aim, in other words, is not to eradicate political conflict or social division per se, but to create new political forms and meanings that allow us to understand or stage such conflicts in a different way. Critics may object that this implies giving up the revolutionary pretension of prefigurative politics. Indeed, seen from a radical-democratic perspective, prefigurative politics does not necessarily establish a durable break with the status quo in its every aspect. But it is also not reformist in that its aim is to challenge and alter the structural and discursive roots of a society. A radical-democratic theory of prefiguration must thus seek to present an alternative to both revolutionary and reformist conceptions of political change.

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There evidently are also key aspects of the originally anarchist conception of prefiguration that need to be maintained. One of its defining features is that it challenges the often-made distinction between the means and ends of political practice. At the same time, as argued above, a radical-democratic conception of prefiguration implies that this is an open-ended process, whose goals and objectives are continuously at stake. It thus follows that prefiguration can no longer simply be defined as the principled insistence that one's 'means be in accordance with the ends' (Franks 2003: 16). How, then, must the relation between means and ends of prefigurative democracy be understood? This question will be addressed in the next chapter.

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